

## DISTRICT LEADER COLLABORATION: A KEY TO OPPORTUNITY CULTURE SCHOOLS' SUCCESS

BY PUBLIC IMPACT

**W**hen Dr. Timisha Barnes-Jones and Dr. Tina Lupton joined the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, Opportunity Culture implementation was happening in the midst of Covid. Lupton, the executive director of professional learning, and Barnes-Jones, the area superintendent for a network of 15 transformation schools, used prior Opportunity Culture experience to help the schools make some adjustments, and by the following year, three of those Opportunity Culture transformation schools came off North Carolina's "low-performing" list. Additionally, nine of the 11 schools implementing Opportunity Culture models either met or exceeded the bar set by the state for expected student learning growth—all results they attribute in part to these models.

Lupton, who had worked closely with the Opportunity Culture director in neighboring Guilford County, and Barnes-Jones, who had been principal at West Charlotte High School when it became one of the first Opportunity Culture schools in the country, collaborate to ensure that Opportunity Culture understanding, processes, and support exist at all levels—bringing together multiple district offices such as human resources and finance, communicating with all area superintendents about Opportunity Culture implementation, and laying the foundation to spread Opportunity Culture models throughout the district.

"When I first got here, having some experience about Opportunity Culture, I knew that it could be impactful for all schools, but I also knew that we weren't there yet as a district, and we needed to continue to expand the implementation and the work, and continue to get feedback from our stakeholders and look at the data to see in which schools was it most successful," Lupton said.

She looked at whether schools were having more success with partial-release versus full-release Multi-Classroom Leader (MCL) roles, for example, and saw that the district needed to set parameters there. Partial-release MCLs have a classroom of record and get time from an advanced paraprofessional known as a reach associate to leave their classroom to co-teach, observe, and coach their team teachers; full-release MCLs do not have a class of their own.

"We wanted to make sure that they were true to their job description and their true impact that they could have, and they weren't being tasked with other jobs, other duties within that time," Lupton said, "ensuring that our partial-release Multi-Classroom Leaders have a solid reach associate that's assigned to them."

Among Barnes-Jones and Lupton's keys to success: extensive, consistent communication at all levels; a strong hiring process; and a focus on data-driven instruction, especially using small groups.

They also identify a strong accountability process as a key—which they say has been a work in progress.

### EXTENSIVE, CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION

*The district's offices and schools have focused on communicating the "why" and "how" of Opportunity Culture models. Within schools, communicating why they need Opportunity Culture roles, details about the roles, and the message of "everyone has a coach" have been crucial, and will need to be recommunicated every year.*

### Communicating the "Why"

"We have many educators that are invested in leadership. They are invested in our kids, they are invested in their schools, and they want to see great things within their communities," Lupton said. "By having these advanced teaching roles, they have ways to be compensated and stay in the communities that they love."

That message—of being able to stay in the classroom and reach more students with great teaching—gets principals' and teachers' attention, Barnes-Jones said. Then they communicate the strategy for building capacity: "sometimes in your hard-to-fill schools, you may not be able to recruit some of the top talent. That is just the nature of running turnaround schools. ...Here is our strategy: We're going to make sure that each one of them has a coach; we're going to make sure that each one of them has ongoing observation and feedback to continue to grow their practice."

The need for better communication was clear from anecdotal experience and survey results, Lupton said. "That's why I have really focused on just having so many different meetings with different stakeholders and bringing different voices into the con-



As Opportunity Culture implementation spreads, district leaders such as Area Superintendent Timisha Barnes-Jones and Executive Director of Professional Learning Tina Lupton increasingly bring past experience with the models when they change districts.

versation, because I want to understand where the communication breakdown is. Is it a perception, is it an opinion, or is it a lack of understanding? Because all of those can be fixed, but they get fixed through conversation, and that has been much of my work, is just talking.”

Over time, the district has brought more people into the conversations and decisions around Opportunity Culture implementation, she said.

“It’s more consistent and it’s better communicated because there’s more people to communicate it. When it was a little bit more siloed, we weren’t really singing the praises of Opportunity Culture as widely as we are now. And I think that, more times than not, we’re really tying things back into these advanced teaching roles and showcasing the work that those positions are doing.”

With more collaboration, Lupton has been able to connect the work to the district’s strategic plan.

“As we are doing this work, we’re looking at what are our big rocks and how is this moving us towards those big rocks. And I think before, when it was kind of just implementing it to implement it, it wasn’t necessarily rooted in those strategic planned goals. I think the more times we can connect it to the other work that we are doing...we become more specific with our parameters and the support that our advanced teaching roles needed.”

### Getting Help on the “How”

To enable success now and ensure that Opportunity Culture implementation continues and expands past the first few years, Lupton and Barnes-Jones bring together as many district leaders as they can.

The district “had some of the foundational pieces that worked very well with Opportunity Culture and so, in working with Dr. Lupton, it was really about, ‘OK, so we want to see all of the

pieces come together so that we have a really strong Opportunity Culture system,” Barnes-Jones said. “What is the professional learning that needs to happen for our Multi-Classroom Leaders, but [also] for those who may be coming up who can become a part of that pipeline? How do we collaborate with human resources so that when we are having our fairs, we can be strategic about who are we looking for, how we are recruiting? And then, talking to our financial department, how do we train our principals on how to leverage their finances? ...It was really just all of us coming together to have a common vision of ensuring that every student in Winston-Salem/Forsyth schools has an effective teacher, because we know they are the number one factor on student achievement.”

With a common vision in place among district departments, plus regular senior team meetings and communication with all area superintendents, they can then focus on what data show about their Opportunity Culture progress, and continually revise plans as needed.

That common vision and strong district support can also help sustain Opportunity Culture schools through principal turnover. The area superintendents, Lupton said, can coach new principals, and because Opportunity Culture models have become embedded, the current instructional team of leaders can bring an incoming principal up to speed. “So although a principal might leave, there’s still great leaders within that school that can continue to move that work and keep it stable within the school.”

Schools generally work with Public Impact, which created Opportunity Culture models, for several years to establish and expand Opportunity Culture implementation. Lupton and others have been focused on building district capacity to sustain and further expand Opportunity Culture schools’ implementation and professional learning after they finish working with Public Impact.

As they plan for expansion to more schools, she said, “Everybody wants OC...because we all see the value in Opportunity Culture—we can see it within all of our schools. So it’s just now the timing of when does each school come on to make the best impact?” More leadership will shift to area superintendents, she said, to help new Opportunity Culture schools draft their designs, communication plans, and budgets.

### Communicating Details of Opportunity Culture Roles

Throughout the year, the district uses survey data to monitor school culture, teacher satisfaction, and the level of understanding among staff members on Opportunity Culture designs, why the roles are in place, and how they work together.

Barnes-Jones works with her area principals to craft consistent messages about Opportunity Culture roles, including that every-



Through meetings such as this with Petree Elementary Principal Alicia Bailey, Barnes-Jones spreads the “everyone needs a coach” message.

one has a coach. “It’s really very meta—I’m coaching principals on how they are coaching MCLs on how they are coaching teachers.”

But, she said, she realized after the first year that she needed to coach principals better on sharing that message, to avoid conflicts and fear.

“You want staff members to have kind of a collective efficacy around ‘everybody needs a coach, everybody needs observation and feedback,’ and so, again, I don’t think I did a great job with that last year,” Barnes-Jones said. “I’m going to do a better job this year because that messaging is important. If you don’t get that messaging right at the onset, you’ll be playing catch-up the rest of the year trying to clean up what you should have communicated early on.”

“There has to be a level of transparency, I think, like if we’re rolling out a coaching model and here are some of the action steps that you might get, this is what a coaching meeting is going to look like—share that with the entire staff so that there’s no trepidation when we come into the classroom or when you say ‘hey, come to your coaching meeting.’ They already know, you already shared, this is what a coaching conversation looks like—actually, I’ll show you a video of what a coaching meeting might look like here at our school.”

Barnes-Jones has been coached in front of her staff in an effort to ease their fears. Additionally, she said, teachers respond better to the coaching knowing that their MCL is held accountable for student results, unlike traditional coach roles.

### CREATING A STRONG HIRING PROCESS

*The district follows Public Impact’s advice to create a district pool for principals of screened candidates, using a rigorous process that includes behavioral event interviews.*

Every year, Lupton said, she brings together a team of principals from Opportunity Culture schools, area superintendents, and current MCLs to review job descriptions and interview questions for

Opportunity Culture roles to be sure these remain valid. When she opens the application period, she pulls the data for each candidate into a spreadsheet, then has the team review it to determine whom to interview. The interview team—which in 2022 did about 150 interviews in the spring—uses a rubric with a firm score candidates must achieve to qualify for the final pool.

“I think that really adds credibility to our hiring process, because we have a pretty strong pool of MCLs out there, and I think the data is showing that,” Lupton said. “We want to really remove all bias or perception of bias that could happen within interviews and that, you know, it’s not someone getting a position because they’re buddies with so-and-so; they’re getting it because they’re meant for this role and they’re qualified for it.”

### USING DATA TO DETERMINE INSTRUCTION, ESPECIALLY FOR SMALL GROUPS

The three levers that schools in her area focus on, Barnes-Jones said, to make dramatic improvements are observation and feedback, data-driven instruction, and culture. Just as district leaders use a host of data sources to monitor and improve implementation, schools must also look deeply at student data to provide instruction that meets each student’s needs—especially in ever-changing small groups.

“It’s really critical for our principals to know exactly the data, exactly what point we need to work on with students, where the gaps are so we can close them,” Barnes-Jones said. “It’s really critical for Multi-Classroom Leaders to understand every student’s strength, their weaknesses, what content they know, what content they don’t know...so when they form those small groups, they are leveraging exactly and homing in on exactly what students need to know.”

That intensive analysis, she said, has been a “game-changer for us.”



It’s critical for Multi-Classroom Leaders to understand student data, says Barnes-Jones, here meeting with Ibrahim Elementary MCL Kayla Isbell.



Barnes-Jones meets with Angie Choplin, principal of Abraham Elementary, and her team to study student data.

Schools follow a data continuum, she said, with daily formative assessments such as exit tickets, weekly assessments, and unit assessments common across her area schools—which the principals analyze together, then analyze with their MCL teams. They also take state formative and summative assessments.

“My leaders will tell you they have seen that graphic of the continuum because it’s almost always at the front of our meetings,” she said. “The expectation is that because you are formatively assessing daily, then tomorrow small group might look differently because yesterday’s formative assessment said, ‘this is the group that I need to put together.’ Next week’s instruction might look differently because at the end of the week these are the students that didn’t get it and so, I need to form some different groups.”

Having principals and their teams study the data together ensures that this analyzing and small-group focus is consistent in her area’s schools.

“We talk about that in our area meetings; we do professional learning on what small-group instruction needs to look like,” she said, with students rotating among small groups led by a teacher, an MCL, and/or a reach associate, while some students may work on independent practice online.

### STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY

Lupton and Barnes-Jones saw early on that the district lacked a strong system for evaluating the impact of Opportunity Culture roles, and are continuing to create a better system.

To start, Barnes-Jones said, they needed to work with the accountability department to establish the key tenets of evaluating Opportunity Culture implementation, then look at what rubrics were used for each role.

Multiple departments—human resources, instructional services, and accountability—need to participate in accountability decisions and parameters at various stages, she said, to make Opportunity Culture implementation a district-wide strategy.

For MCLs, Lupton said, “we’re looking at about three years’ worth of data to say, ‘Are their teachers consistently growing? Are they better in this situation than they were before the MCL?’ Like, how has this made an impact for this teacher, and is the teacher staying?”

Keeping an eye on teacher retention as well as student learning data has been important for Lupton, who has noted that the most successful Opportunity Culture schools have had the lowest turnover among new teachers.

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